

Waukesha's water request gets look from Great Lakes states, provinces

By Don Behm of the Journal Sentinel
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Don Behm

In its application for Lake Michigan water, the City of Waukesha has proposed returning water to the lake by discharging treated wastewater to the Root River at S. 60th St. in Franklin. Representatives of eight Great Lakes states and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec will be in Waukesha Wednesday and Thursday to get a firsthand look at the city's request.



Representatives of eight Great Lakes states and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec will be in Waukesha on Wednesday and Thursday to get a firsthand look at the city asking for a [Lake Michigan water supply](#).

This request is unprecedented: Waukesha is the first community in the United States located entirely outside the Great Lakes basin to ask for a diversion of water under a 2008 federal law known as the Great Lakes protection compact. The city is about 1.5 miles west of the subcontinental divide marking the basin boundary.

The compact prohibits Great Lakes water from being pumped beyond counties straddling its drainage basin. The City of Waukesha is in a straddling county, so it can ask for lake water to solve public health or environmental problems.

But other nearby communities — East Troy or Whitewater in Walworth County, Fort Atkinson or Jefferson in Jefferson County — could not ask to tap into the lake, under both the federal law and Wisconsin's compact implementation law. The same goes for Madison and beyond.

This request has been intensely scrutinized: Fully 13 years of studies, including more than five years of analysis and revisions by Wisconsin environmental regulators, was prelude to this final review by the other Great Lakes states and provinces.

[Waukesha Water Utility](#) General Manager Dan Duchniak delivered the original application to Madison in June 2010, only after regional planners and city consultants independently recommended a switch to the lake.

Following requests for additional information, the state Department of Natural Resources a year later announced the application was "[sufficiently complete](#)" for it to examine.

A lake water supply would replace 10 wells, including seven deep wells drawing radium-contaminated water from a depleted sandstone aquifer, Duchniak said. Those deep wells provided 83% of the water distributed throughout the city in 2014.

Waukesha is under a court-ordered deadline of June 2018 to fully comply with federal drinking water standards for radium.

Bus tour

In December, the DNR [forwarded the city's request](#) to the other seven Great Lakes states and the provinces for review along with its finding that the application meets requirements of the compact and could be approved.

All of Waukesha's water supply alternatives outside the Great Lakes basin "are likely to have greater adverse environmental impacts than the proposed diversion" and the city "is without a reasonable water supply alternative" other than the lake, [the department concluded](#) in its technical review.

Those are among the issues the other states must decide for themselves.

So a Wednesday [morning bus tour](#) across Waukesha and Milwaukee counties will highlight the city's well supply, its sewage treatment plant, and major elements of the proposal to take water from the lake and send a return flow back to it.

As an indicator of the controversy surrounding this request for lake water, Duchniak and other Waukesha officials will not be allowed on the bus to prevent them from lobbying the regional representatives.

The public can meet the representatives at a Thursday afternoon information meeting to be followed by a hearing where citizens are invited to comment on the request. Both the meeting and hearing will be held in the Shattuck Music Center on the Carroll University campus.

Environmental groups in the region have criticized Waukesha's lake supply plan as unnecessary, and they assert the city could drill additional shallow wells to reduce dependency on the deep sandstone wells.

But drawing more shallow water would cut groundwater flows to surface streams and wetlands and damage those resources, [Duchniak testified Tuesday](#) at a hearing before the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality in Lansing.

"The DNR's own modeling found more than 900 to 1,000 acres of wetlands would be harmed if a combination of deep and shallow wells was used," he said.

And shallow wells in urban areas are susceptible to contamination from pollutants on the surface, according to Duchniak. Waukesha halted use of two of its three shallow wells Feb. 1-4 after they were tainted by chloride from street salting activities, he said.

Governors to decide

The Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers has [set a timetable](#) for the states and provinces to review Waukesha's request through April 21.

Then governors of the eight states will meet in late May or early June in Chicago to decide on the application. The Great Lakes compact requires unanimous approval, so one state could block the plan.

Waukesha is asking the states to approve a plan for diverting up to an average of 10.1 million gallons of lake water a day by midcentury, and returning the same volume of water to the lake as treated wastewater.

In 2014, the city pumped an average of 6.6 million gallons of water a day from wells. If the lake supply is approved, the city likely would start out at an average of less than 7 million gallons a day and gradually build to the maximum average of 10.1 million gallons a day.

The Wisconsin DNR would continue to monitor the city's water use and adjust diversion volumes every 20 years as a condition of approval, department officials said.

'Borrowing' lake water

Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly described the diversion and return plan as "borrowing" lake water, in testimony last week at the Michigan hearing.

The Great Lakes Compact requires the return flow so there is no negative effect on lake levels, he said.

"The decision on Waukesha's application is not a choice between protecting the Great Lakes and providing safe drinking water for Waukesha," Reilly said. With the mandatory return flow, both goals can be met, he said.

Reilly responded to critics of the plan who say there would be a cumulative effect on the lakes if more and more straws are allowed to suck water out of the basin.

"For the very few straws that may ever go into the basin to meet local needs, just as many straws must go back" to the lakes, under the compact, he said.

Waukesha has proposed building a \$207 million network of pipes and pumps to divert lake water to Waukesha and return treated wastewater to the lake.

Waukesha would buy lake water from Oak Creek, as part of the city's proposal. Oak Creek would deliver the water through a 30-inch, 19.4-mile-long pipe to the Hillcrest reservoir in Waukesha.

Waukesha would pump fully treated wastewater through a pipe extending 20.2 miles from its sewage plant on the Fox River at Sentry Drive to the Root River at S. 60th St. in Franklin. The river is a tributary of Lake Michigan.

Waukesha water request events

Wednesday, 1 p.m. — Informational briefing by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and Waukesha Water Utility, Room 214, Campus Center, 101 N. East Ave., Waukesha. Open to public.

Thursday, 2 p.m. — Public informational meeting, Room 122, Shattuck Music Center, 218 N. East Ave., Waukesha.

Thursday, 3 p.m. — Public hearing, Room 122, Shattuck Music Center.

About Don Behm



Don Behm reports on Milwaukee County government, Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, the environment and communities in southeastern Wisconsin. He has won reporting awards for investigations of Great Lakes water pollution, Milwaukee's cryptosporidiosis outbreak, and the deaths of three sewer construction workers in a Menomonee Valley methane explosion.

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